

# Mothers-in-arms

## Two women, one problem



Photograph: John Birdsall (posed by model)

Interview with  
Vicky by the  
Face It project.

Interview with  
Maureen by  
Harry Shapiro

**M**Y name is Maureen. I first found out my son Scott was a heroin addict when he was 27. He rang one morning and said he wasn't very well. We went down to see what we could do for him, and then he told me he was a heroin addict and he wanted to come off it. I tried to get him referred to local services but at that stage it was a 28 weeks waiting list. I started to associate with people who were using heroin to get as much information as I could to help Scott. I told them about the waiting list and they told me even when he got there it would be shit. The service wasn't up to much. I also heard about methadone.

I decided that a six month wait was far too long. I got the Yellow Pages and rang GPs, and eventually I found a doctor who would prescribe methadone. Finally we got Scott into the local service and he got a methadone prescription. But he was only at the local service for a very short time because they had a stringent urine testing system and Scott was failing it. Three strikes and you're out, and Scott very quickly got to his three strikes. Everyone I have spoken to thinks this service is barbaric.

Everybody is on supervised prescription, so there is no chance for them to go and get on with life; it cuts your chances of having a regular job, having any sort of normality. It's humiliating; there is no screened area and you have to take methadone in front of everyone else. And they think giving out 40 ml of methadone makes them no better than drug dealers. The last time Scott went there, he left the hospital without it and went straight back to the black market.

I protested about the services to the DAT. I spoke to the local newspaper about the size of the problem and to tell people how hard it was to access help. Mostly the authorities just laughed at me – just a mother on a mission, she doesn't know what she is doing, how can she tell anybody how to prescribe by watching "Casualty" – all those sorts of back biting comments.

Addicts started calling at my house for coffee, a sandwich and somebody to chat to. I started a telephone help line for addicts and their families. Then I wanted a resource centre for addicts, a first point of contact which would inspire them to think that things can change, they could be stable and abstinent. Because none of them believed this. All they got from services was condemnation and blame.

I was getting people into the private sector and getting them enough methadone to keep them healthy. While they were on the prescription I was supporting them, getting them on Prince's Trust courses, taking them to the pictures or for a meal. They stopped committing crimes and became more settled.

Policemen call with people in the back of the car, saying, "there is no point in charging them, can you have a word with them?" Probation do the same, they bring people to me. The amount of contact I have is

**Vicky** from the Romany community and **Maureen** who lives in Stoke tell their tales of trying to get help for their sons

really intense. I ring people on a daily basis to see how they are doing.

I think we have to get to the stage where we give the addicts what they need rather than what we think they should have. If you sit with an addict and you're honest with them, you can set up a good chance for them. Most addicts lie and cheat because that's the situation they are forced into. They can't be honest with anybody, because honesty has too many consequences for them.

**M**Y name is Vicky, I'm from the travelling community, and the mother of six children. Because the travelling community is so close, I thought it was always going to be more difficult for drugs to get in because of the way we are with our children. When it happened, it was devastating. My son became a drug addict through the use of heroin and crack cocaine or anything else that he could get his hands on. When I found out what was going on he had been using a long time. My son told me himself when he knew he had a problem.

I knew nothing about drugs whatsoever and the consequences were devastating for myself, my husband and my immediate family. The mother is the main stem. Most of what happens lays on the mother's shoulders; if anything goes wrong the mother will be at fault. There were a lot of tears and a lot of desperation. I seemed to be using the telephone continually trying to find out what agencies could help me to straighten my son out. All I was offered was support for myself. That wasn't what I wanted; I needed help for my son, but I needed to go outside the community because inside, if you are a drug addict you're taboo.

I couldn't detox him on site, we had to use a young 'gorger' woman's house, which was very good of her, and for a week at a time I never saw daylight through nursing him. I tempted fate by saying I was disappearing through illness up north, when in fact I was sitting perhaps 20 miles away detoxing my son. I needed help but I couldn't get it. Every time I left my home I was making lies up about where I was going. It cost us hundreds of pounds to get treatment privately for our son. I detoxed with him seven times in between having major surgery myself. I was near to breaking point.

Some 'gorger' women can abandon their kids, some can't, but as a mother in this community we can't do that. I couldn't let anybody know about it; I had to protect him because the day he came back into this community I didn't want anyone to say, "he's a druggie, keep away from him", whether he was using or not.

This is the first time that I've really opened up about it and I know that there are many mothers in this community in the same situation as myself. They shouldn't have to pay hundreds and hundreds of pounds. They shouldn't have to sell their things to get

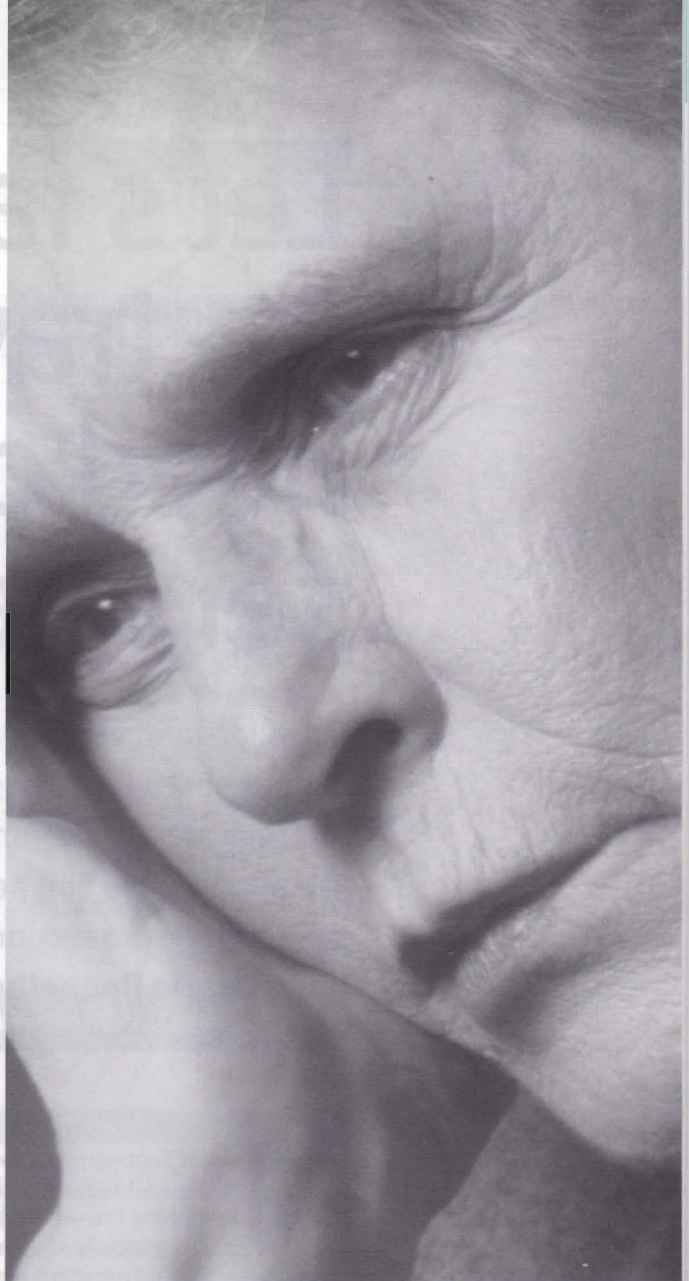
I came across a brick wall when I was desperately in need of help. Everything is behind closed doors – it's time those doors were opened

the money for detox or implants. We met up with another traveller family in a Harley Street waiting room. He picked up that we were travellers because we were speaking Romanis to my son. He introduced himself to us and we nearly died with the shame. He was sitting, not with one, but two sons with bad addictions. We found it easy to talk to him and he was telling me about his own wife and the state she got herself in because of her children's addiction.

Travellers are wary about different agencies stepping in and nosing about. They're frightened of the jargon and the red tape and not being able to understand things. I'm not saying they're unintelligent, they just haven't got the experiences of outside agencies. I came across a brick wall when I was desperately in need of help. Everything is behind closed doors and it's time those doors were opened and the community was able to access better education facilities and help, better than I was ever given. I felt like I stood on my own.

Thankfully my son is not using any more. Thank God I'm getting over my difficulties and my son's getting over the addiction. I wish I had known about Face it and others like it when I was needing the help. No mother should go through that. I knew nothing. ■

See over for feature on the Romany community



Photograph posed by model